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C O N F I D E N T I A L DAMASCUS 000229

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PRM FRONT OFFICE, NEA/ELA FOR SONTY, AMMAN FOR KANESHIRO,
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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [IZ](#) [SY](#)

SUBJECT: SCENESETTER FOR A/S SAUERBREY'S VISIT TO SYRIA

REF: A. DAMASCUS 110

[B](#). DAMASCUS 119

[C](#). SECSTATE 17155

[D](#). DAMASCUS 196

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Michael H. Corbin for reasons 1.4 b/d

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Embassy Damascus warmly welcomes you to Syria. Your visit comes amidst heightened SARG sensitivity to the presence of up to 1.3 million Iraqi refugees here, especially given public grumbling about price hikes and increased crime and social woes. Additionally, the SARG has real security concerns linked to foreign and domestic extremists, radicalized by the conflict in Iraq. Largely in response to these concerns, in mid-January, the SARG instructed immigration officials to implement unannounced new measures that would limit most Iraqis to a two-week stay in Syria and require most to leave for a month before returning.

Following the February visit of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, the SARG softened the measures by permitting newly arrived Iraqis a one-month stay, with the possibility of two three-month extensions, after which Iraqis had to leave the country for a day before reentering. The lack of clarity that shrouded these steps continues to serve as a sword over the head of many Iraqis who fear that the policy could change yet again. The same lack of clarity also complicates international assistance to displaced Iraqis. The Syrian government requires that most if not all efforts by the UN, international organizations and the few international NGOs here be coordinated through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Additionally, local civil society groups and charities are leery of taking foreign assistance.

[1](#)2. (C) Summary Continued: We expect Deputy FM Faisal Mikdad will be your interlocutor, but we have heard that FM Walid Mu'allim is considering meeting you. As the highest-level U.S. executive branch to visit Damascus in more than two years, your interlocutors will probably deliver a stern finger-waving about U.S. responsibility for the Iraqis presence here, due to instability and violence in Iraq and to the lack of U.S. engagement with Syria in a much wider dialogue, particularly on Lebanon, the peace process and the Golan Heights. The SARG's real preoccupation centers on these regional issues, which are central to the SARG's No. 1 priority--regime survival. End Summary.

HOW MANY IRAQIS ARE IN SYRIA

[1](#)3. (SBU) No one knows the number of displaced Iraqis who are

living in Syria. A March 2006 socio-economic study by UNHCR, UNICEF and the World Food Program (WFP) estimated the number of displaced Iraqis in Syria at 450,000, as reported in ref 1A. The survey, which used limited demographic data from household surveys and somewhat questionable Ministry of Interior figures, concluded that 57.2 percent of Iraqis here were Shia; 21.2 percent were Sunni; 15.4 percent were Catholic; 1.5 percent were Sabian (an obscure pre-Islamic sect); 4.2 percent were Orthodox Christian; and .6 percent fell in the "Other" category. Since the fall of 2006, estimates of displaced Iraqis here have continued to climb, reaching up to 800,000 in December 2006 and up to 1.3 million in March. UNHCR, UNICEF and WFP officials are seeking to conduct a new socio-economic survey of Iraqis here, possibly with the help of the Norwegian FAFO foundation, but plans have yet to be finalized.

14. (SBU) UN officials are particularly concerned that many school-age Iraqis are probably not attending school. The SARG has reported to UNHCR that there are 28,000 Iraqi children in Syrian schools. If the 28,000 figure is correct (although that number seems low to us), and if estimates of more than 1 million Iraqis in Syria is correct, only a small percentage of Iraqi children are receiving education. A March 6 report by the Italian news agency, Adnkronos, cited Syrian officials as saying 300,000 Iraqi children were not attending school.

RISING SYRIAN COMPLAINTS LEADS TO SYRIAN ACTION

15. (C) The rising number of displaced Iraqis (who at 1.3 million would represent almost 7 percent of Syria's population) have led to increased complaints by the Syrian public about some overcrowded schools in areas populated by Iraqis and rising prices, as reported in ref B. Some press reports, for example, suggest that housing costs in some areas have risen by 300 percent. Additionally, the presence of Iraqis is certain to have contributed to serious budgetary strains connected to SARG subsidies, particularly on items such as diesel and electricity. Separately, the influx of Iraqis has also contributed to rising social woes such as prostitution and theft, although Syrian authorities seek to limit public release of such information. Syrian contacts have commented to us that they have been told the new SARG policy is linked in part to the presence of some 20 Iraqi criminal gangs in Syria that are involved in actions such as the kidnapping of other Iraqis here. Additionally, the SARG has real security concerns linked to foreign and domestic extremists, radicalized by the conflict in Iraq.

16. (SBU) As a result of these rising concerns, in mid-January the SARG instructed immigration officials to implement new measures (not announced officially but eventually reported in regional press) that would limit most Iraqis to a two-week stay in Syria and require most to leave for a month before returning, as reported in ref B. A month later after the visit of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, the SARG softened the measures dramatically by permitting newly arrived Iraqis a one-month stay, with the possibility of two three-month extensions, after which Iraqis had to leave the country for a day before reentering. Newly arriving Iraqis are required to report to the Ministry of Interior's Immigration Department within a month of their arrival to get their first three-month extension, according to our contacts.

SARG INFLUENCE ON THE UN, IOs AND NGOS

17. (SBU) Publicly, the Syrian government has always insisted that its policy on Iraqis remains the same. Privately, we have heard three variations of the government's policy toward Iraqis. Some Syrian officials such as the Syrian Minister for Social Affairs and Labor insist, much as she did with incoming Lebanese during the summer 2006 conflict between

Israel and Hizballah, that the Iraqis are Syria's guests and that the Syrian government is quite capable of providing for them. Others have expressed the position that the Syrian government does need international assistance to respond to needs of poor Iraqis but also assert that such efforts must also be extended to poor Syrians and that it will only accept the channeling of aid through UN and international organizations already working with Iraqis here or through direct cash assistance to the SARG. Those in the third camp, such as Deputy PM for Economic Affairs Abdullah Dardari, claim that the Syrian government does need international assistance and want lots of it to address Syria's macroeconomic problems but that aid should be delivered directly to the SARG.

18. (C) The bottom line is that President Bashar al-Asad (who makes all the decisions--albeit under the sway of various groups of advisors) has yet to decide what to do about accepting assistance. UNHCR draft agreements to provide assistance to the ministries of Health, Education, and Higher Education remain unsigned by the SARG one month after the High Commissioner's visit. While the SARG has agreed to let UNHCR step up registration efforts and the International Office for Migration (IOM) to conduct processing, we suspect, as usual, that the SARG will choose not to make a choice and will hope that the Iraqi population can be kept in line by enhanced Syrian measures. You are unlikely to hear any clarification as to SARG policy on assistance.

19. (C) The lack of clarity that shrouded policy toward Iraqis continues to serve as a sword over the head of many seeking refuge from the conflict in Iraq, who fear that the policy could change yet again. The same lack of clarity also complicates international assistance to displaced Iraqis. The Syrian government requires that most if not all efforts by the UN, international organizations and the few international NGOs here be coordinated through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Separately, it is a capital offense for local non-governmental organizations to accept foreign money without special government permission. SARG suspicion of foreign organizations has been intense since the SARG's reversal of influence in Lebanon and is particularly high in the run-up to the April 22-23 parliamentary elections, which the SARG expects outsiders to use to undermine it. Civil society groups and charities are terrified of being associated with the U.S., even on humanitarian issues. Civil society members are routinely called in for questioning and face detention or travel bans at the whim of Syrian security services.

110. (C) Even the ostensibly independent Syrian Arab Red Crescent led by prominent Sunni businessman Abdul Rahman Attar has had to deal with interference from the Syrian Minister of State for Red Crescent Affairs Bashar al-Sha'ar, for example as occurred while attempting to assist the influx of displaced Lebanese during last summer's Israel-Hizballah conflict. A number of new international NGOs are trying to register in Syria; many such as the International Medical Corps are seeking to partner with the Syrian Arab Red Crescent as a way to expedite their registration process. Others such as Catholic Relief Services are seeking to partner with Caritas (which we understand is not officially registered but operates under the Catholic Church in Syria), while International Orthodox Christian Charities is seeking to partner with the Syria-based Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch and All the East, which already provides charity to Iraqis here. We are hoping that under the cover of the Syrian Red Crescent we will be able to arrange for you to see some other international NGO representatives here, but this is not at all guaranteed.

SARG PREOCCUPIED WITH MORE THAN JUST IRAQIS

111. (C) SARG protocol officials have welcomed your visit to Damascus, although they have yet to provide information about your SARG meetings here. We first heard rumors that they

might designate DFM Faisal Mikdad as your interlocutor, but, more recently, contacts have suggested that FM Walid Mu'allim is considering meeting with you. If Mu'allim meets with you, diplomatic contacts have quietly told us that the MFA has not responded to the demarche on Iraqi refugees in ref C because it was simply seen as a request for Syria to host those Iraqis who worked with coalition forces until they can be resettled in the United States. (Note: This was not part of the demarche as delivered to the SARG, but this Syrian line of thinking suggests that the government is looking for weak points in the USG position. End Note.) Your yet-to-be designated SARG interlocutors are likely to lecture you that Iraqis are the guests of Syria, seeking to sidestep requests to ease SARG restrictions on international efforts to assist displaced Iraqis. Additionally, as the highest-level U.S. executive branch to visit Damascus in more than two years, your interlocutors will probably deliver a stern finger-waving about U.S. responsibility for the Iraqis presence here, due to regional instability and the lack of U.S. engagement with Syria in a much wider dialogue, particularly on Lebanon, the peace process and the Occupied Golan Heights.

¶12. (C) The SARG's real preoccupation centers on these regional issues, which are seen here are central to the SARG's first priority of regime survival. As reported in ref D, apart from its Iranian alliance, the SARG, while publicly boasting that it is beating isolation, faces a minefield in its relations with others in the region. Desperately seeking to rejoin the Arab world, the SARG still faces hostility from the Saudis and a dismissive attitude from the Egyptians, only heightened as an "anti-Iran" front gathers steam in the Arab world. The SARG seems to have been initially troubled by the success of King Abdullah in wooing Hamas with the Mecca Agreement, although the diplomatic aftermath does not seem to have harmed longer-term Syrian interests in the Palestinian issue or changed the SARG's fundamental calculations. At this stage, Syria would like to see some movement on any track of the peace process.

¶13. (SBU) Even so, your meeting with SARG officials will be a chance to deliver the following points of State's demarche on Iraqi refugees (ref D), which we delivered to Post's designated SARG interlocutor, the chief of protocol but to which we heard no official response. All of the following points remain valid:

-- As a humanitarian matter, continue to permit, in accordance with your laws and security requirements, entry to visitors from Iraq. Limit arrest, detention, fines, and deportation of Iraqis who have "overstayed" the validity of their entry permits to cases of security and criminal concern. We would also appreciate official SARG clarification of its policy toward Iraqi refugees;

-- Allow Iraqis access to essential social services - primarily health and education services - as national resources permit;

-- Accept appropriate assistance from UNHCR and other humanitarian providers, to ease the burden of caring for those Iraqis no longer able to subsist on their own resources. Additionally, we appreciate SARG cooperation in facilitating our processing of extremely vulnerable Iraqi cases for resettlement in the U.S.

-- Provide temporary refuge to Palestinians now in Iraq in camps administered by UNHCR inside their borders and continue to permit UN agencies to have access to Palestinians camped on the Iraq side of the border.

CORBIN